What Frustrates EFL Learners When Writing in English? Perspectives from Libyan EFL undergraduates

Dr. Dalal Alfadhil Attaher Salheen *
English Department, Faculty of Arts, Bani Waleed University, Bani Waleed, Libya
*Corresponding author: dalalsalheen@bwu.edu.ly

ما الذي يحبط متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية عند الكتابة باللغة الانجليزية؟ وجهات نظر طلاب جامعيين ليبيين

دلال الفضيل الطاهر صالحين* قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة بني وليد، بني وليد، ليبيا

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Abstract:

Writing is one of the most challenging skills in language learning, requiring a significant level of formal and academic language proficiency. Despite considerable efforts by instructors, learners continue to struggle, often feeling overwhelmed. This study aims to investigate the frustrations faced by learners of English as Foreign Language (EFL) when writing in English. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) identify common challenges in the writings of Libyan EFL learners, and (2) interpret the reasons behind these challenges. Using the nested mixed-method approach, data collection was in two phases: (a) an analysis of 20 writing samples, and (b) interviews with five learners. The analysis revealed multiple issues related to both authorial and mechanical aspects of writing. To address these challenges, learners should engage with academic texts appropriate to their proficiency levels, focusing on vocabulary, sentence structure, transitions, and organizational patterns. However, exposure to these texts must be accompanied by a commitment to diligent practice and active engagement in developing formal writing skills. Success in overcoming these challenges hinges on a combination of instruction, constructive feedback, and consistent practice to internalize essential language proficiency and writing conventions.

Keywords: Libyan Undergraduate Learners, Writing Skills, Obstacles, EFL Context.

ملخص

تُعد الكتابة من أصعب المهارات في تعلم اللغة، إذ تتطلب مستوىً كبيرًا من الكفاءة اللغوية من الناحية الرسمية والأكاديمية. وعلى الرغم من الجهود الكبيرة التي يبذلها المعلمون، لا يزال المتعلمون يواجهون العديد من الصعوبات، وغالبًا ما يشعرون بالإرباك. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى دراسة الصعوبات التي يواجهها متعلموا اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) عند الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية. وعلى وجه التحديد، تسعى الدراسة إلى التالي: (1) تحديد التحديات الشائعة في كتابات متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية الليبين، و(2) تفسير أسباب هذه التحديات. وباستخدام نهج الأساليب المختلطة المتداخلة، تم جمع البيانات على مرحلتين: (أ) تحليل 20 عينة من كتابات الطلاب، و(ب) تمت مقابلة عدد خمسة من الطلاب. كشف التحليل عن العديد من الصعوبات المتعلمين التفاعل مع النصوص الأكاديمية المناسبة لمستويات كفاءتهم، مع التركيز على المفردات وبنية الجملة والانتقالات والأنماط التنظيمية. ومع ذلك، يجب أن يكون التعرض لهذه النصوص مصحوبًا بالالتزام بالممارسة الدؤوبة والمشاركة النشطة في تطوير مهارات الكتابة الرسمية. يعتمد النجاح في التغلب على هذه التحديات على مزيج من التعليم وردود الفعل البناءة والممارسة المتسقة لاستيعاب الكفاءة اللغوية الأساسية واتفاقيات الكتابة.

الكلمات المقتاحية: المتعلمون الجامعيون الليبيون، مهارات الكتابة، العقبات، سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

1. Introduction

Learning another language can be a valuable asset. In particular, learning English can be rewarding, but a challenging task. Learners of English need to be competent users in both the productive (writing and speaking) and receptive (listening and reading) skills. In fact, when it comes to communicating, all four skills are crucial. However, writing holds a special place in terms of being required throughout life in numerous situations, as Browker (2007) argues.

Writing is the formal way of communication through which individuals can express their thoughts. Within the school context, for instance, writing is required to demonstrate improvement and pass courses. As Brown stated,

"without some ability to express yourself in writing, you don't pass the course" (2000, p. 339). Schools around the world often use writing as a key form of evaluating learners' performance (Afrin, 2016). And this may demonstrate how important it is for students to be proficient writers in order to succeed in both academic and professional settings (Tilahun, 2018). Moreover, for English major students, writing is one of the core courses provided and required in their academic program. So, mastering this skill is a necessity more than a choice.

Yet, mastering the skill is complicated. Khasawneh pointed out that learners need to be at a good proficiency level of grammar, knowledgeable about writing mechanics, vocabulary, and adequately acquainted with the different types of writings (2021). In the context of Libyan education, English is taught as a foreign language, where learners lack the sufficient chance to practice the target language (Alnasser, 2022). While teachers make efforts with a variety of techniques, the skill of writing is still challenging for many students.

In particular, Libyan English majoring students are among those struggling learners who lack the ability to come up with good piece of writing that bears all the robust components considered major in any academic writing. There is a lack of literature addressing the obstacles this population encounters. Thus, the goal of the current study was to investigate the writing challenges faced by Libyan EFL students, responding to the following questions:

Q1/ What are the English writing difficulties encountered by Libyan EFL learners during writing tasks?

Q2/ What is the most common difficulty faced by Libyan EFL learners during writing tasks?

Q3/ What is the implication of the difficulties on the overall English competence of Libyan EFL learners?

1. Literature Review

Writing is a vital skill for academic achievement, making its mastery essential for learners throughout their educational journey. However, the skill is complex, which may explain why many learners face challenges in writing. Consequently, this has been the focus of numerous investigations aimed at enhancing learners' abilities and supporting teachers in the teaching-learning process.

However, this concern is not only limited to Libyan learners; students of English worldwide struggle with academic writing (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022). A study by Gonye, Mareva, Dudu, and Subanda (2012) examined the reasons behind writing difficulties among students in Zimbabwe, revealing that the issue is multifaceted. The study was an analysis of 550 writing documents identified various obstacles, including spelling, grammatical, and punctuation errors. Additionally, students faced challenges with citation, and their writing often exhibited redundancy.

Similarly, other researchers investigated the same issue with different participants and found similar results. For example, a study conducted on Saudi postgraduate students revealed significant problems related to sentence structure, with numerous grammatical errors indicating issues with coherence (Al Fadda, 2012). Arab-speaking students studying abroad (in Malaysia) also faced similar challenges, including difficulties with sentence structure, vocabulary, and a tendency to lose focus in their writing (Abdelkarim, 2013).

In the Libyan context, several studies have examined the barriers to producing quality writing. For instance, Aldabbus and Almansouri studied the Faculty of Education, University of Benghazi, on the challenges of students in their academic writing. Questionnaires were distributed to 36 students majoring in English, both undergraduates and graduates. The findings indicated that both groups faced similar issues, involving the use of inappropriate academic language, difficulties with paragraph cohesion, disorganization of ideas, and general challenges in writing. These difficulties can be attributed to their low level of English proficiency and limited writing practice opportunities (2022).

Another study, Albakkosh, Zargoun, Aljammali, and Mohammed (2023) involved forty-five Libyan learners with a similar research focus. Two types of questionnaires, one closed-ended and the other multiple-choice, were distributed to collect data. The findings indicated that the primary challenges related to writing skills were grammatical errors, vocabulary issues, and problems with word formation. These difficulties were attributed to a lack of language practice and interference from the learners' mother tongue.

Similar findings were anticipated in this study conducted on Libyan EFL learners at the Faculty of Arts, Bani Waleed University. While comparable circumstances may yield similar results, differing outcomes can also emerge. Scientific results are necessary to enhance the existing body of knowledge. The Libyan EFL learner population should be regarded similarly to other learners, and their unique circumstances must be considered, as they may provide insights for alternative solutions.

2. Methodology

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the challenges faced by Libyan EFL students in writing in English. To achieve this objective, the nested mixed-method approach was employed, specifically utilizing mixed methods. The primary method is qualitative, while the nested method is quantitative. That is, both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilized to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of the issue, as noted by Dawadi, Shrestha, and Giri (2021). Data collection involved conducting observation over six sessions in which students engaged in writing activities and discussed their writing processes, along with an analysis of their written work. Purposive sampling was adopted for the qualitative component, and random sampling for the quantitative one.

A total of 20 writing samples were collected for the purpose of this study. These samples were the first writing assignments completed by second- year students at the beginning of the 2024-2025 academic year. The participants included 20 students, comprising 3 males and 17 females, all approximately 19 years old. Approval for the study was obtained from Faculty of Arts through the English department. The identity of the students have been kept private, and confidentiality commitments have been strictly honored.

The writing task focused on the topic of "Learning English Abroad." Students were instructed to write approximately 250 words, beginning with a well-structured topic sentence that included both a topic and a controlling idea, which would guide the development of paragraph. Each paragraph was required to contain at least three supporting sentences, closing with a strong concluding sentence. Students were allocated one hour to complete the task, although some exceeded this time by nearly 15 minutes. Prior to the writing task, students participated in six preparatory learning sessions, which provided them with adequate input and preparation for the assignment.

In addition, 5 students were purposively interviewed for the purpose of this study. Two open-ended questions, derived from the research questions, were asked to seek learners' interpretations of their obstacles with focus on the most frustrating difficulties encountered when they write in English.

To transform the collected data into meaningful information, various methods were employed to address the research objectives. For the quantitative analysis, Microsoft Excel was utilized to present descriptive statistics. For the qualitative data, a content analysis approach was used to evaluate students' writing samples.

3. Findings and Discussion

Based on the qualitative data, the following terms were identified illustrating the common challenges do Libyan learners face: 'Zoning out', 'Time constrains', and 'Hesitation'.

First, it appears that students generally struggle with what is commonly referred to as "zoning out." They often express that they are out of ideas and feel they can only articulate or compose one or two complete sentences, even in their native language. This finding aligns with the literature, particularly the studies by Anyiendah (2017) and Moses and Mohamad (2019) who found what? Scholars have argued that one of the challenges encountered by leaners of English is their lack of interest. Developing writing skills is a lifelong talent, requiring various aspects to nurture that talent. When learners lack the required knowledge, it often leads to a loss of interest.

Second, students often struggle to accept the time allocated for writing tasks. They typically hold a preconceived notion that any amount of time will be insufficient. The challenge often lies in generating ideas, which can seem daunting and time-consuming. As a result, thirdly, hesitation takes over, leading students to spend excessive time revising their ideas rather than focusing on editing their writing. Despite their efforts to build knowledge, time management often proves ineffective. Poor time management can significantly undermine students' efforts. In their academic journey, effective time management is crucial (Ghafar, 2023), especially for tasks assigned with specific time limits, such as exams.

However, disengagement, time constraints, and hesitation all reflect deficiencies in students' writing abilities and underscore the authorial aspects of the issue. This was clearly evident in the analysis of their writing samples, particularly concerning mechanical elements. Table (1) illustrates the scarcity of the main writing problems noted in students' writing based on the frequency order from the highest to the lowest frequencies:

Aspects	Frequency of Error	Percentage (%)
Spelling	68	22.5%
Vocabulary	58	19.2%
Punctuation	51	16.9%
Capitalization	44	14.6%
Fragments	23	7.6%
Subject-verb agreement	22	7.3%
Tense	18	5.9%
Prepositions	17	5.6%
Total	301	100%

Table1: Frequency of Errors and the Percentage Occurred in Students' Writing Samples.

As shown in Table 1, these are the most common issues found in students writing:

I. Spelling Mistakes:

Spelling mistakes are the most common writing problems encountered by Libyan EFL learners, accounting for 68 instances (22.5%). It appears that students spell words based on their pronunciations. The types of spelling errors observed include omissions of letters, transpositions, exchanges, and additions. For example, common errors include "ipinion" (opinion), "latterly" (literally), "jop" (job), and "samary" (summary). Reflecting on this, there is a clear influence of L1 interference on students' spelling, as Libyans tend to spell words in their native language

orthographically rather than phonetically. This likely explains the frequent misspellings of English words among the students in this study.

II. Misuse of Vocabulary:

Misuse of vocabulary is the second common issue that students encounter 58 (19.2%). In their writing, it seems that students mistranslate from Arabic to English where the interference of their mother tongue is apparent in their sentence structures. Moreover, students also commit blunders in selecting appropriate words or phrases that contribute nothing to the meaning. For example: *steps* and *get* in this sentence, 'There are many <u>steps</u> teachers need to <u>get</u> their teaching license.' Another example: 'arrive' 'The creative technology that we <u>arrive</u> in 21st century.'

III. Punctuations:

Punctuation comes in the third position in terms of problematically 51(16.9). Students are not aware of using 'full stop' at the end of each sentence, and are not attentive of using 'commas'. Most of their writings are just run on sentences with no punctuation or appropriate conjunctions. For example: 'in this century was school alitter and some people they can't go to school to learn any thing about comunty to devlop the technology and it's effect on it.' This can be explained through the mother tongue influence. As stated by Al Towity (2021), students' writing of Arabic sentences has an impact on their understanding of 'run-on sentences' and 'comma splice.'

IV. Capitalization:

Capitalization is another concern that students are not aware of 44(14.6%). Students are not conscious of using capital letter at the beginning of their sentences. Even when they do, it is not right away! Probably the first attempt erased as it is clear from their sheet, and sometimes crossed with the pen and changed over it. All over again, this is because of the L1 interference, as Arabic don't have capital letter and small letters. Arabic only has different shapes of letters, which is based on the position in a word; initial, medial, or final.

V. Fragment:

Even though Fragments are among the covered topics this year, students still encounter difficulties with this structural aspect of writing 23(7.6%). Within their paragraphs, students tend to forget either the subject or the verb. For example: 'travelling by plans better...',and 'in this time don't easy...'. Arabic grammar also has an impact on this since verbs are not necessary to form a complete sentence in Arabic. However, a verb is always required in English sentences in order for them to be complete.

VI. Subject-Verb Agreement:

Subject-verb agreement, misuse of tense, and prepositions are among the annoying errors students committed with instances 22(7.3%), 18(5.9%), 17(5.6%), respectively. With regard to subject verb agreement, students seemed to not be aware of this aspect as shown in the following examples: '.. teacher learn..' and 'it reach ...'. Misuse of tenses still represent an obstacle for the population of this study. Students don't know that they can use both the present and past tenses in the same sentence or paragraph. However, there are many different tenses (verb forms) in English, and learners may not always benefit from their usage. Prepositions seemed to be the least struggling part of their writing. What mistaken with them are those which are dissimilar to their native language. For example: 'I go to shopping'.

4. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The current study explored the typical challenges faced by Libyan EFL undergraduate students when writing in English. The findings revealed that most participants have a strong interest not only in completing assignments but also in mastering the skill. However, obstacles still persist.

Writing skills encompass various aspects of the language, with grammar and vocabulary playing critical roles. That is, grammar and vocabulary classes are essential for producing quality writing. However, writing classes alone are insufficient to equip students to become proficient writers. Additionally, translating from Arabic to English often leads to errors in their writing. Cultural factors also play a significant role.

In general, writing skills cannot be acquired through a one-time learning process; it is an ongoing endeavor that requires learners to master multiple aspects of the language. Students frequently seek clearer guidance by asking targeted questions to enhance their understanding. Nonetheless, the outcomes often fall short of their expectations. By understanding the challenges encountered in developing writing skills, instructors can implement more effective methods for providing feedback and support. Furthermore, educational representatives should address the obstacles that learners face to improve their educational experiences. Finally, students should recognize the importance of developing their writing skills to motivate themselves in the area.

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